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MODERN RACISM: NEW MELODY FOR THE SAME OLD TUNES

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About the Author

Dr. Valerie Batts is the founder and executive director of VISIONS, Inc., an institution located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which provides training and consultation in anti-racism and multiculturalism. With a doctorate from Duke University, she is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist and a Clinical Teaching Member of the International Transactional Analysis Association. Dr. Batts has eighteen years of experience in training human service providers, psychotherapists, educators, clergy, and private sector managers both on the national and international levels. Her expertise includes enhancing effective communication, interpersonal skill building, psychotherapy techniques, supervision strategies, lifestyle changes, and the establishment of environments which support, respect, and appreciate differences. Her clients include Episcopal Divinity School, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Meharry Medical College, and Procter and Gamble Company. She has written several articles on modern racism and multicultural organizational change strategies and is noted for her dynamic, insightful, and compassionate approach to training.

The national debate continues regarding whether or not affirmative action is still a necessary and effective strategy for attempting to correct historic power imbalances between the races. This debate is an example of the complex and insidious ways in which racism and racial prejudice in this country continue to inhibit the effective creation of a society in which true equal access to opportunity exists for every citizen.[1] In my graduate school work at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, in the late 1970's, I worked with researchers who were demonstrating that such debates are actually covert or "symbolic" ways of expressing deeply ingrained biases that are typically unrecognized as such.[2] In this article, I will describe my process of coming to understand this subtle or "modern" form of racism. I will also offer a model for identifying and changing modern racist behaviors. This model has evolved from consultation and training services offered to individuals and groups from the public and private sector since 1984.

The model begins by describing **personal**, **interpersonal**, **institutional**, and **cultural** expressions of modern racism. Examples of white behavior will be given, followed by a discussion of the impact of modern racism on blacks and other target group[3] populations. A description of target group responses will be offered. Relationships between these expressions in blacks[4] and other people of color and whites are then analyzed. The article will end by overviewing the change process

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I have developed along with many colleagues. Our interventions strive to eliminate guilt and blame and to encourage acceptance of responsibility and understanding of personal and systemic dysfunctional consequences of practicing modern racism and internalized oppression.

CONTEXT

I was born in the segregated South of the United States in the early 1950's. My parents were educators and were involved in efforts to ensure quality education for black children. My father was the principal of the first black middle school in our community. This school was built under the doctrine of "separate but equal" in the mid-nineteen sixties. I remember numerous "battles" that he, my mother, and their friends and neighbors fought to keep bringing adequate resources into our community. I remember our struggles to integrate public facilities. I remember both the fear and the determination within our community to bring about equal access. I remember when the struggle began to change from economic and social parity to integration.

I completed my junior year of high school in the last year of the existence of the segregated Booker T. Washington High School. My last year of high school was completed at the forcibly desegregated Rocky Mount Senior High School. Upon reflection, I believe my interest in addressing the subtle forms of racism began then. As a student activist, I was involved in several efforts to expose unstated assumptions and to encourage honest acknowledgment and dialogue about racial prejudice. Something kept telling me, "If we do not examine people's hearts, this desegregation process will not work."

Upon entering college in 1970, I became part of the largest class of black students to enter the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill up to that time. There were approximately 200 of us. There were about 200 other black students already on campus. Given a student body of over 20,000, we were a small and largely invisible group. Part of how we survived this "foreign" experience was by forming a black support group, the Black Student Movement (BSM). Even when taking age into account, the "culture shock" I experienced during those first years at UNC was as great as any I have experienced while I traveled across the U.S. and internationally as an adult.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, was and still is a liberal Southern community. Howard Lee was mayor during those years, making him among the first black mayors since reconstruction. Hubert Humphrey won the presidential election in Orange County, North Carolina. It was the only county in the state that Ronald Reagan did not carry. The late Richard Epps was elected student body president and made national headlines as the "first black student body president" of a major Southern university.

At the same time, other black students and I were still battling assumptions of inferiority and continual pressures to assimilate to white cultural norms. Such efforts typically occurred as "off the mark" attempts to help us by whites or were expressed by them in ways that we were unseen or our cultural expressions were misunderstood and/or minimized. The absence of role models or symbols of our worth and value also contributed to the perpetuation of assumptions of inferiority. As black students we developed many "survival strategies" (i.e., manipulating guilty whites, playing the clown, and working extra hard, etc.), some of which ultimately proved detrimental to us. The seeds were getting sown for the life's work I was to move on to.

After leaving Chapel Hill, I decided to teach in a predominantly black Southern medical school. It was an important re-emersion experience.[5] I reconnected with the richness and security of black culture. I also began to see how the "survival strategies" that I had seen among us as students existed also among black people in predominantly and historically black environments. I began to ponder the impact of racism on blacks and how it can affect us even when we are the majority group in an educational system. I also began to notice how

black students responded differently to black and white teachers.

I left this work in 1977 and went back to graduate school, this time at Duke University. The social psychology literature was beginning to assert that racism was all but gone in the United States. Public opinion polls were showing increased acceptance of blacks in all walks of life.[6] Three years later, the federal government took the position that we as a country had solved the racial problem and made efforts, for example, to dismantle the voting rights act. Some analysts suggest that social science as a discipline participated in this process of denial.[7] Current examples of such participation are still alive and well.[8]

The stance that racism had all but been eliminated in our country was quite problematic for me. It discounted both my experience as well as what I saw around me. In talking with others, I discovered that it was troubling to many blacks and whites who realized that it is not possible to change over three hundred years of history in a mere twenty to thirty years, even under the best of circumstances.[9] I was not alone in seeing continued resistance to integration of public institutions and facilities and to equal opportunity efforts to change the status quo and bring blacks and other people of color into positions of power and influence. This resistance became a symbol of a modern form of racism.

Fortunately, there were social psychologists at Duke working to challenge this notion that racism had declined significantly in the then thirteen years since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Their work provided a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the experience I had been having throughout my journey into "desegregated America." The differentiation of racism into "old-fashioned" and "modern" forms was very useful.

The view that blacks are inherently inferior to whites has been referred to as "old-fashioned" racism.[10] Its corollary, of course, is the myth of white superiority. Until 1954, racism was the law of the land. Old-fashioned racism involved behaviors, practices, and attitudes that overtly defined blacks as inferior and whites as superior. Blacks were thus entitled to fewer of society's benefits and resources. Behaviors, such as whites expecting blacks to defer to them in department stores, or practices of separate entrances to these stores, with blacks coming through small back entrances, are examples of the old forms. Laws prohibiting contact between blacks and whites, ranging from separate school systems to segregated seating on buses, are also examples. Lynchings, cross burnings, and Ku Klux Klan (KKK) activities are extreme forms. Even the paternalistic treatment by whites toward their black nannies is a kind of old-fashioned racism. The nanny is loved and valued as long as she understands her subservient role. She is expected to be seen and not heard around adults, to appreciate the family leftovers, to take her meals in the kitchen with the children, as well as to be called by her first name by them.

These forms of racism all have in common the overt acceptance of blacks as less than equal and whites as better than blacks. The civil rights movement that reached its zenith in 1965 in this century with the passage of the Civil Rights Act made many of these behaviors illegal for the first time. Although anti-lynching laws had been passed earlier, they were more stringently enforced as a consequence of public response to the new ruling. As overtly racist behavior in the public arena became illegal, it also became unpopular even in personal, private settings.[11] Although KKK activities did not stop entirely, legal sanctions were brought against many of its members.[12] Student groups that protested white supremacist activities on our nation's campuses were supported rather than the supremacists' rights to freedom of speech. It appeared that our country's three hundred year legacy of subjugation of brown peoples was beginning to abate.

At the same time of this explicit resistance to old-fashioned expressions of negative racial attitudes, we still saw painful struggles across the

country as black people attempted to attain parity in the public and private sector. We saw this more subtle type of resistance justified on non-racial grounds.

Modern racism has been defined as "the expression in terms of abstract ideological symbols and symbolic behaviors of the feeling that blacks are violating cherished values and making illegitimate demands for changes in the racial status quo." [13] It is, further, the attribution of non-race related reasons for behaviors that continue to deny equal access to opportunity to blacks[14] and other targets of systemic oppression. It is still based on the assumption, the underlying belief, that blacks are inferior and whites are superior. The negative affect that accompanies these beliefs does not change just because of changes in law and practice. Rather the affect has to be submerged given the changes in what is viewed as legal and acceptable in the society.

What happens, then, when whites are in a position of having negative affective responses to blacks or other people of color? Given the lack of appropriateness of old-fashioned racist behaviors, it is likely that the affect will be expressed in subtle and covert ways.[15] The impact of the expression of this subtle or modern racism is as detrimental to change in our society as old-fashioned racism. The expression of such behaviors continues to result in blacks and other people of color being targeted to receive fewer of the benefits of being a citizen in the United States. The impact also perpetuates the "invisible knapsack of privilege" that whites are more likely to experience and take for granted.[16] Illustrations include: explanations of white flight in response to school desegregation such as "It's not the blacks, it's the buses"; beliefs that affirmative action is "reverse discrimination"; acceptance of "the doctrine of color blindness"; or minimization by whites of the systemic causes and impacts of continued disparate treatment that whites and people of color receive in the United States.

EXPRESSIONS OF RACISM

Behavioral strategies used in the struggles to change old-fashioned racism typically included cultural exchange activities as well as confrontational training seminars or workshops. The cultural exchanges often heightened awareness of differences, but without continued contact did not create substantive change in attitudes or behavior. Confrontational change workshops often left participants feeling blamed or attacked. Other participants came away having a sense of what it feels like to be oppressed but feeling guilty and powerless.

When I left Duke University and started working as a professional psychologist, I began to conduct workshops to challenge modern racism.[17] Participants have come from across the United States and from a variety of settings: educational settings, including public and private schools, universities and community colleges, mental health agencies, psychotherapy practices, hospitals, religious groups, community groups, arts groups, affirmative action organizations, legal services, corporations, state and local governments, and long-term care settings. On-going consultation relationships with several organizations from the public and private sector have also provided information on how modern racism occurs and on strategies for change.[18]

Modern racism can be expressed at the **personal, interpersonal, institutional,** or **cultural** level. In its typical expression these levels interact.[19] Following is an example drawn from one of our workshops which illustrates how each level operates and a definition of each level.

Example:

A female workshop participant who grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, was a teacher in a northern public school system. She was trying to understand why the black and latino students in her classes perceived her as a racist when she felt she treated everybody the same. If anything, she admitted, she tried harder to make things fair and equitable for them. In her tone of voice was the message, "After all, I feel sorry for all the

injustices these children face and for the poor conditions surrounding their lives. I'm trying to help them. Why don't they value my efforts?"

The school teacher was genuine in her desire to help, yet exploration of her behavior led her to realize that outside of her awareness, she was operating on a personal assumption that black and latino students are inferior due to their upbringing in non-mainstream (i.e., less adequate) communities. She behaved toward them in interpersonal situations as if they were helpless and less capable. This form of racism is different from old-fashioned racism in that the woman's genuine desire was to correct for past inequities, not to perpetuate them. The consequence, however, was the same. The students were still being treated like second class citizens and thus were being set up to either accept the inferior helpless point of view or to reject the white person or the educational system she represented.

An exploration of this woman's racial learning was revealing. She was born in a northern city in the late 40's. As a young child, she liked to ride at the back of the bus when she and her family members went downtown on Saturdays. Her family moved to Louisville when she was nine. This was before buses had been desegregated in that town. The woman remembered vividly the first Saturday that she and her mother took the bus in her new hometown. She got on the bus and eagerly started to walk toward the back as she had always done. Her mother called out to her to stop and sit at a seat near the front. As nine-year olds are prone to do, she resisted, saying, "No, come on, let's go to the back." Her mom grabbed her arm nervously and said, "Sit down." She pulled her down. The woman remembers feeling confused and puzzled. She noticed with interest her mother's discomfort but said no more.

They reached their destination, went shopping, and then returned to the bus for the ride back home. The woman again got on first and decided to try to go to the back. She was hoping her mother's previous behavior was just a fluke. Just as she said, "Look Mom, there are seats at the very back, let's hurry," her mother grabbed her and shook her, saying, "If I ever catch you going to the back of the bus again, I'll spank you." Her mother was shaking with apparent fear and rage. The woman remembers being shocked, then scared. She looked around the bus and noticed for the first time that all the people at the front of the bus were white and that all of the people at the back were black.

The woman immediately flashed on other things she had heard from her family about colored people and said to herself, "Oh, I am supposed to stay away from these people." She remembers feeling sad and scared on the ride home. She was finally learning her place as a white person. She remembers that all through public school she stayed in her place and kept to her own kind although she never quite believed it was right. She went to college during the sixties and became an active supporter of the Civil Rights movement. She decided to go into teaching partly as a result of taking a sociology course in which she learned about the problems facing disadvantaged minorities. She remembers being filled with guilt during college about the ways blacks had been treated. She was ashamed of her family and angry with them. She genuinely wanted to make things better for black people.

This woman tried hard from the time of her college years "not to see color." As she started teaching black and latino students, she dismissed subtle nagging sensations of guilt, disgust, or fear. She convinced herself that "people are just people" and turned any remaining negative affect into pity for the "victims" of systemic oppression. She stayed away from whites who expressed overtly negative racial attitudes and tried hard to be fair and honest and to get her students of color to perform just like white students.

As will be outlined in detail later, this woman's personal and interpersonal responses actually set up the perpetuation of dysfunctional interracial behavior even though that was not her intention. Further, she was employed by a school system that had a majority of black and latino students, while 80% of the school personnel were white. Few of these white staff members had contact with people of color in their personal or professional lives, except for students. The school system saw its role as helping to prepare students to succeed in the United States of America, as defined by white, male, Protestant, middle class, middle age, heterosexual, physically able norms.

The school's culture reflected the values of this "normative" group as well. Most black and latino students felt isolated and alienated in the environment. In addition to experiencing interpersonal racism from school personnel like

the workshop participant, they also were experiencing racism in its institutional and cultural expressions. There were no bilingual education programs. The administration could not see the usefulness of such activities as their job was to teach these children standard English. When latino students spoke to each other in Spanish, they were often reprimanded. Black English was viewed as substandard even though many of the black children communicated clearly that they were, in fact, bilingual as well. They spoke Black English at breaks and at home, yet knew how to speak and write the way they were being trained to do at school. In both cases, the students were comfortable with their two cultures; school personnel were not.

Similarly, most of the textbooks stressed "American" (i.e., United States) and European culture. Except on special occasions, typically because of student or parent interest, little attention was focused on African, African-American, or the variety of latino cultures. Faculty and administrators felt the students would not be adequately prepared for the "real world" if they spent a lot of time focusing on such "frills" as jazz, salsa, life in Brazil or Cuba, or issues in South Africa. For the students of color, these were very important issues. No attempts to use these interests to teach basic skills was being considered. Again, the assumption of those in charge about how learning should occur, both in terms of process and content, did not allow for inclusion of cultural differences.

In summary, a definition of each level of racism is offered below:

Personal:

At this level, racism is prejudice or bias. It is the maintenance of conscious or unconscious attitudes and feelings that whites are superior and that blacks or other people of color are inferior, or that these groups' differences are not acceptable in some way. Personal level racism includes cognitive or affective misinformation or both.[20] The misinformation may be learned directly, as through overt messages, or indirectly as through observation.

Interpersonal:

Behaviors based on conscious or unconscious biased assumptions about self and other are interpersonal manifestations of racism. It is often through uncomfortable or tense cross-cultural interactions that individuals discover subtle racist behaviors within themselves or others.[21]

Institutional:

An examination of power relationships reveals institutional racism. The question to be asked is, to what extent do the intended and unintended consequences of policies, practices, laws, styles, rules, and procedures function to the advantage of the dominant group and to the disadvantage of people of color? To the extent that whites in this society have the political, economic, educational, social, and historical power and access to institutionalize prejudices (i.e., the myths of white superiority and black inferiority) against blacks and other people of color, whites are in a position to practice or maintain institutional racism.[22]

Cultural:

The ability to define European-American and Western cultural preferences as what is deemed as "right and beautiful" is the consequence of having institutional power and access in this country. When the standards of appropriate action, thought, and expression of a particular group are perceived either overtly or subtlely as negative or less than, cultural racism has occurred. Conformity to the dominant culture is then viewed as "normal" when in fact the myth of the inherent superiority of the group setting the standards is operating. If such is the case, it is likely that a given individual will need to change her behavior to fit those of the dominant group just to be accepted as competent, attractive, or talented.[23]

MODERN RACISM

As illustrated in the example above, modern racism is often not malicious by intent. Understanding the expressions or levels just outlined helps in clarifying how the consequence of particular behaviors can result in racism regardless of motivation. The school teacher in the earlier example, for instance, was very supportive

of institutional changes that would bring in more black and latino teachers. Yet, her personal and cultural biases and preferences made it hard for her to accept a prospective latino language teacher who in English classes taught Spanish to English speakers and English to Spanish speakers, and then had them spend some time dialoguing in the non-native and then the native languages in each class. The white teacher found herself agreeing with the administration that while this idea had some merit perhaps, it was not efficient, and it was redundant with what the students learned in Spanish foreign language classes.

Following is a description of suggested ways that modern racism occurs. It is useful to consider that the behaviors outlined can manifest themselves at each of the four levels defined above. It is also the case that currently racism is likely to manifest itself in subtle forms. This is not to discount, of course, the increase in overt old-fashioned racist behavior that has continued to escalate across the United States since 1985.[24] These reactions might be thought of as the backlash from a decade or so of denial in our country that racial problems do continue to exist.[25] Modern racism theory attempts to explain the impact of the growing silence on racial issues in society from approximately 1975 to 1985 as well as the current controversy or tendency to explain racism away or to be reluctant to see it.

Institutional gains made between 1954 and 1965 were clear and obvious. As civil rights issues became more substantive, however, and therefore more of a challenge to the power brokers, the character of racism began to change. Derrick Bell notes:

> Rather than eliminate racial discrimination, civil rights laws have only driven it underground, where it flourishes even more effectively. While employers, landlords, and other merchants can no longer rely on rules that blatantly discriminate against minorities, they can erect barriers that although they make no mention of race, have the same exclusionary effect. The discrimination that was out in the open during the Jim Crow era could at least be seen, condemned, and fought as a moral issue. Today, statistics, complaints, even secretly filmed instances of discrimination that are televised nationwide... upset few people because, evidently, no amount of hard evidence will shake the nation's conviction that the system is fair for all.[26]

Let us take the issue of education, for example. The first battle for equality was to allow blacks entry into previously all white schools. The struggle for this civil right was arduous but resulted in a clearly definable outcome: blacks going to schools with whites. Once this goal was accomplished, whites quickly wanted to move to the position that the issue was resolved.[27] But ensuring equity requires more than having blacks in schools with whites.[28] The larger questions, such as, how many blacks and other people of color help control the curriculum that all children receive; what relevant materials will be used that reflect and affirm diverse cultures as equal or important and that expose the myth of white and Western superiority; where schools will be located; and how much money will be spent on children's education, were not yet addressed.[29]

The other reality is that whites, as a group, never really accepted open enrollment. Instead, white flight was clearly the option taken by the majority, while blacks and other target groups remained in schools that they no longer controlled. This phenomenon becomes more entrenched as bankers, realtors, and developers engage in housing and lending discrimination while the federal government fails to enforce housing discrimination law. It is a much more silent strategy than the anti-integration mobs of the late 1950's and early 1960's. Yet its power to negatively impact the educational experience of much of the country's youth has yet to be fully realized.

Stated differently, our society's actions by its shift toward a belief that racism has ended, discounted the unavoidable impact of more than three hundred

and fifty years of history. *It did not allow individuals and institutions to alter structures, materials, attitudes, and, in many cases, behavior to fully create equity in a multicultural sense.* Rather, it forced whites and people of color to struggle in new ways to attempt to handle the remains of these centuries of oppression. Legislative changes were made but the hearts and minds of people remained the same.[30] John Dovidio and Samuel Gaertner assert that this difficulty in acknowledging racism was made even more difficult in such a climate because of a deeply held U.S. value on "doing the right thing."[31] If racism is now "wrong," how can we admit that we still struggle with it?

The following list of behaviors or manifestations of modern racism for the dominant or non-target groups are offered from experiences of myself and my colleagues to help explain this struggle.[32] The accompanying examples come from our work in educational settings.

Dysfunctional rescuing:

This form of modern racism is characterized by helping people of color based on an assumption that they cannot help themselves; setting them up to fail; being patronizing or condescending; helping people of color in such a way that it limits their ability to help themselves. This "help that does not help" is often motivated out of guilt or shame. It may be conscious or unconscious and is often embedded in the "culture of niceness or politeness" thus making its limiting aspects hard to discern.

Examples:

A white teacher "gives" a black student who is making a "B+" an "A" instead of challenging her. The student is active in the black student association and is obviously quite bright. The teacher feels vaguely guilty about societal injustices and worries that the student might see him as racist. The teacher is not active in campus efforts to change institutional racism and believes that if he just "does right by blacks," everything will be okay.

A white department head brings a 30-year-old black female into a previously all white male biology department. He feels good about insisting that she be chosen and denies the importance of the reluctance of his colleagues. All of these faculty have been at the institution for at least 10 years and have failed to support the hiring of any target group members. The department chair fails to recognize the potential set up for failure involved in bringing target groups into a hostile environment without a plan for impacting the culture. "Tokenism" is another name for this process of "doing what's right" without preparing the existing organization for this change.

Blaming the victim:

In this form, racism is expressed by attributing the results of systemic oppression to the target group; ignoring the real impact of racism on the lives of blacks or other people of color; blaming people of color for their current economic situation; or setting target group members up to fail and then blaming them.[33] To provide structural and status changes but to give inadequate support, that is, time, training, or mentoring, for the development of positive and constructive outcomes, is one illustration. The non-target accepts little or no responsibility for current inequities and puts all the responsibility on target group members for negative outcomes.

Examples:

A black student is labeled as having misplaced priorities because of her work on black issues on her campus; she is considered bright but too busy being angry to study. She was not accepted into a student leaders campus honorary society because her concerns were viewed as "too narrow."

A latina female becomes depressed and exhibits paranoid symptoms in a faculty meeting after being the lone latina and female faculty person for a year in a previously all white male department where she is largely avoided or patronized. The chairman recommends she get psychiatric treatment.

Avoidance of contact:

Modern racism may also be manifested by not having social or professional contact with people of color;

making no effort to learn about life in communities of color; living in all white communities; or exercising the choice that whites most often have of not being involved in the lives of people of color.

Examples:

A white university administrator who lives in an all white neighborhood says, "I just don't have the opportunity to meet black people."

A white supervisor is a very pleasant person but does not confront a situation when two black male employees engage in conflict. The supervisor, however, would confront the situation if the employees were white.

Denial of cultural differences:

In this expression, modern racism means minimizing obvious physical or behavioral differences between people as well as differences in preferences that may be rooted in culture; discounting the influence of African culture and of the African-American or Asian-American experience; or being color-blind in a way that masks discomfort with differences.

Examples:

A white faculty member describing the only black faculty member he works with, and trying hard to avoid saying that the faculty member is black.

A white administrator says with much exasperation, when being given information about racial differences in retention of blacks in his university, "What does race have to do with it? Aren't people just people? Skin color doesn't matter, we are all just people."

Denial of the political significance of differences:

Finally, modern racism may be manifested by not understanding or by denying the differential impacts of social, political, economic, historical, and psychological realities on the lives of people of color and whites, minimizing the influence of such variables on all our lives and institutions, and may be accompanied by an attitude that cultural differences are just interesting or fun. Such a stance results in an unwillingness to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which the impacts of the myth of white superiority continue.

The stance also minimizes white privilege as well as the insidious nature of the prevalence of the mentality and practice of "West is Best" by those in positions of power and control in key aspects of life in the U.S. and most of the world as the 21st century dawns. This type of modern racism is firmly entrenched and is perhaps the most binding. Unraveling the hold of a dominant Western perspective will take a massive rethinking of many of our ways of being and doing in the United States.

Examples:

A white middle-level manager came to a workshop very upset about the affirmative action plan his company had implemented. He was convinced that affirmative action was reverse discrimination and said, "We don't need AA here. We hire blacks." Blacks comprised 10% of the management positions (up 8% in two years because of the plan) and 90% of the custodial positions.

A white faculty member dismissed Jesse Jackson's campaign for president as minimally important at best, for after all, Jackson had no governmental experience. When students pointed out the number of voters Jackson had registered and the large number of popular votes he had obtained, the faculty member said, "That's not really important; what's important is that he is not a qualified applicant."

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

As discussed in the definition of institutional racism above, blacks and other targets of racism are in a reactive posture. This is not to minimize in any way the personal, economic, and political power that target group members have available to them. This analysis is intended to challenge targets and non-targets to think seriously about the extremely detrimental impact of maintaining a society where institutional power is distributed predominantly to one group.

It is difficult not to buy into, at some level, the misinformation that society has perpetuated about victim status.[34] Internalized oppression

is the incorporation of negative or limiting messages regarding our way of being and responding in the world by targets of systemic oppression. We define our uniqueness as inferior or different in an unhealthy or unuseful manner. As the character of racism changes, so does the reaction of people of color to it. Most forms of internalized oppression had their origins in situations when their manifestation was necessary for physical or psychological survival.[35] Such behaviors are most likely to occur initially as survival responses in institutions or in situations where the target person perceives a threat.

Five expressions of internalized oppression have been identified.[36]

System beating:

This expression of internalized oppression involves attempting to get over or around the system; manipulating others or the system through guilt, psychological games, or illicit activities; acting out anger; or playing dumb, clowning, being invisible. The strategy involves an underlying belief that the target group member cannot succeed by being direct and/or by being herself or himself. The target group person feels a need to "take care" of whites' feelings or to hide parts of self for fear of being misunderstood or viewed unfavorably because of his or her "difference." It may also take the form of using anger or hostility to manipulate whites.

Examples:

A black student manages to go through four years of college with a reading deficit. He is a star basketball player and learns through the grapevine how to take courses where he can "get over."

A latino teacher in an "upscale" independent school does not speak out when faculty and staff condemn latino yard workers for speaking Spanish and using English poorly for fear of being disliked.

A black hospital employee intimidates all of her white superiors such that she just comes and goes to work as she pleases, and does as little work as possible. Any negative feedback is defined by this employee as racism on the part of her bosses.

Blaming the system:

This manifestation is characterized by deflecting responsibility for one's actions; putting all the blame on the other or the system for one's problems; or refusing to learn about and acknowledge mental, emotional, and stress related issues as real. This expression results in an externalizing and blaming of others that in effect gives away the target group members' ability to effect change. It sometimes masks a sense of hopelessness in the target group's ability to visualize and/or implement a more desirable system.

Examples:

A black student who is not studying but blames his teacher and the "system" for his bad grades. He is unwilling to accept what role his lack of preparation may have in his failure to succeed.

A latina employee applies for a job for which she is not qualified, and says it is the system's fault when she does not get hired. She is unwilling to take advantage of opportunities to get the appropriate training and "blames" it on the fact that her English is too poor.

Anti-white avoidance of contact:

This form of internalized oppression includes avoiding contact with whites; distrusting all whites (obsessive concern and suspicion); being overly sensitive to rejection; rejecting people of color who are perceived as "not black enough" or "not Chinese enough," etc.; escaping (through fantasy, dreams, drugs, alcohol, sex, food, withdrawal). Such a stance is fueled by a rage that can be self-destructive to the person who carries it. The utility of anger is to stop injustice and to insist on and create equity; when it becomes internalized it can hamper the autonomy of the target group person.

Examples:

A Chinese employee who refuses to talk to a white supervisor about a job related problem

because he says the supervisor won't understand. He does not admit that he is really uncomfortable talking to whites. He therefore limits his own chances for a positive change in his situation.

A black who calls another black an "Uncle Tom" because the latter is working hard to get a promotion and because he is light-skinned. This perpetuation of "colorism" and of a denial of the impressive "profound work ethic" among black people is self limiting.

Denial of cultural heritage:

In this expression, internalized oppression means distrusting one's own group, accepting that one's group is inferior, giving deference to whites; rejecting or devaluing one's cultural heritage; valuing and overemphasizing white standards of beauty; valuing and accepting whites as the highest authority and white standards as superior. Such a stance colludes with the myths of "white superiority and inferiority of people of color."

Examples:

A latino patient who does not want a latino nurse or doctor because the patient thinks they are not as well qualified as a white nurse or doctor.

A black employee who does not associate much with blacks, who is uncomfortable considering her African heritage, and who, when with whites, aggressively expresses negative opinions of blacks as a group.

Lack of understanding or minimization of the political significance of racial oppression:

Internalized oppression can also be manifested by being passive and unassertive; feeling powerless *(learned helplessness)*; misdirecting anger to persons with less power; having difficulty expressing anger; avoiding conflicts at all costs, turning anger inward resulting in high blood pressure, strokes, ulcers; buying copiously (symbolic status striving; conspicuous consumption of goods—clothes, cars, etc.); in-group fighting, displaying sexist or other "ism" behaviors, e.g. heterosexism, classism, etc.; taking advantage of the lack of information or feelings of powerlessness of other people of color. This stance involves failure to examine the pervasive nature of racism and the multiplicity of ways in which target group members are set up to collude with its perpetuation. It can also result in an unwillingness to accept that the historical legacy of racial oppression has not been corrected systemically, and its effects continue to impact most aspects of life.

Examples:

A black first-level manager is unwilling to apply for a promotion because he does not think he will get it. He is sure that the organization will not promote a person of color simply because there are none presently. He has the necessary skills but does not believe he can be successful. He does not understand how to seek out and organize support to promote systemic change.

An Asian supervisor always does what the white manager wants and is harder on the employees of color whom he supervises. He believes that the white supervisor cannot be and should not be successfully confronted but feels powerful as he "pushes" his supervisees of color.

Behavioral Manifestations of Modern Racism and Internalized Oppression

Modern Racism	Internalized Oppression
1. Dysfunctional rescuing	1. System beating
2. Blaming the victim	2. Blaming the system
3. Avoidance of contact	3. Anti-white avoidance of contact
4. Denial of differences	4. Denial of cultural heritage
5. Denial of the political significance of differences	5. Lack of understanding of the political significance of differences

HOW MODERN RACISM AND INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION INTERACT

Challenging modern racism and internalized oppression begins as individuals give up the need to deny that "isms" still exist. Rather, they start to look for manifestations of oppression in the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural context. Modern racism and internalized oppression are often played out in a complementary fashion. Given a white who practices dysfunctional rescuing, for example, many people of color will resort to system beating rather than confront the behavior, if they perceive it to be the safest choice, or if they have no permission to be assertive with whites. Such actions reinforce the dysfunctional behavior on both parts and keep the system intact.

People of color, who for a variety of reasons have adopted a "Don't trust whites" stance, will often be misunderstood by whites who practice avoidance of contact. The white person will take the person of color's avoidance of contact stance personally, and will often use it as justification of further avoidance. Such whites discount the realities of racism for blacks or other people of color and do not seek information about their experiences. They are also likely to perceive blacks or latinos, for instance, who are in a pro-black or pro-latino posture as anti-white when the individuals are not.

At the institutional level, most welfare laws of the late 1960's were written from a dysfunctional rescuing position. Recipients, typically children and their mothers, were set up to fail and are now being blamed for their plight. Monetary benefits were inadequate, the process for attaining help was dehumanizing, and the incentives for getting training or for working were not available.[37] Those welfare recipients who attempted to beat the system used blame to justify their actions while avoiding any responsibility for changing their conditions.

Using the system when there are no other feasible options is "survival behavior" and not reactive internalized oppression. Indeed, a critical question to be asked as individuals are teasing out "the dance" between modern racism and internalized oppression is, when is a given target group members' "difficult behavior" reflective of a survival strategy? In the face of overt or covert racism, internalized oppression behaviors can be the key to psychological or physical survival. It is very important that such behaviors which are reactive to racism not be used to blame people of color or other target group members for their adaptations to oppression.

PROCESS OF CHANGE

As has been illustrated, many examples of modern racism have been generated from our training and consultation efforts since 1984. Participants in these efforts typically share a common goal: learning how to incorporate an appreciation of cultural diversity and multicultural strategies in their work or organizational settings. They want to be able to create or enhance this appreciation both interpersonally and structurally. There is an apparent debate among change agents in this field regarding the focus or outcome of such strategies. There is considerable discussion regarding the questions: Are we providing diversity work, anti-racism work or are we promoting multiculturalism? Where does anti-bias work fit into this discussion?

Such a debate can become distracting to the effort. It is our assumption that we are looking at essentially all of these issues in any successful change effort.[38] Diversity speaks to the need to change numbers and, in many cases, perspective. It addresses who is in a given organization and what ideas, images, processes, etc. are included in the group's work. Cultural diversity speaks specifically to the inclusion of such aspects from a cultural instead of, or in addition to, an individual perspective. Anti-bias efforts are also aimed at ensuring that multicultural work looks at all forms of bias or discrimination. We believe that successful anti-racist, multicultural work has to include this focus.

Anti-racism efforts speak to the need to explicitly address historic and current power imbalances. Addressing these imbalances successfully will include attention to how they play out with respect to all power discrepancies. Women of color, for example, are targets of racism and sexism. To address sexism successfully, one must address racism. To address heterosexism successfully, as another case in point, racism must be addressed as well as there is differential access for lesbians and gay men of color. In both instances, non-targets experience costs in addition to privileges as men and as heterosexuals. And the list goes on. It is not possible to successfully address racism in any lasting manner without raising these other aspects. The issue for change agents will be where do we begin, not will we consider all of these parameters.

We see multiculturalism as the process through which change occurs. Multicultural strategies are designed to increase the ability of individuals and groups to recognize, understand, and appreciate differences as well as similarities. This three-step process occurs most often in stages and involves first recognizing and unlearning one's biases. For most of us in the United States, the world view incorporated included negative perceptions or other dysfunctional adaptations to people who were different from the accepted norm. This norm, unfortunately, for most U.S. citizens, from non-target or target groups, involved an evaluation of how close one fits to being white, male, young to middle aged (i.e., 25 to 45), heterosexual, U.S. born and U.S. English speaking, Protestant, middle class and physically able.

Understanding, the second step, involves seeing and thinking about the content of cultural group differences. Reclaiming one's ethnic background is part of this process, as well as giving up dysfunctional ethnocentrism. The goal is coming to experience that being equal does not mean being the same and that valuing diversity means being willing to accept the validity of ways of being other than one's own. This belief begins to be applied personally and systemically. It includes explicit attention to power sharing, redistribution of resources, and redefinition of "what is right and beautiful" at all levels. As the implementation of this worldview starts to occur, appreciation becomes the process. Participants start to embrace the value, philosophy, and practice that any system, institution, program, or curriculum is enhanced by the acknowledgment and usage of cultural differences as a critical factor.

Personal and interpersonal change involves, then, acknowledging and valuing one's own cultural background and recognizing the particular dynamics found within different cultural groups. This process includes working through cognitive and affective misinformation about other cultural groups as well as about one's own group. It is facilitated by regular contact with persons from and information about different groups as well as by on-going contact with members of one's own group as mentors. Willingness to try on new behaviors, to make mistakes, and to disagree are necessary parts of the process.

It is important to stress that unlearning modern racism and internalized oppression in all of its expressions is a **process**. Part of the reason that the character of racism shifted for most people in the United States rather than changed, is because there was such an urgent need to fix the problem.[39] The goal in changing racism is to stay open when behaviors or practices arise which are, in their consequences, regardless of their intent, discriminatory. It also means examining fully the multitude of ways in which our society currently still functions economically, socially, politically, and culturally to the advantage of whites and to the disadvantage of people of color. As long as such institutional and cultural racism continue to exist, modern racism behaviors or practices will continue to emerge even among well intentioned people.

Changing institutional and cultural racism involves a commitment by all members of an organization to examine norms, values, and policies.

Overt power discrepancies must be changed. More subtle reward systems that reinforce status quo behaviors must give way to systems that include diversity and multiculturalism at every point. Institutions typically have to start by acknowledging the fear among those who control the current structure of either losing that control or of doing the wrong thing (i.e., being called a racist or making things worse by focusing on differences). These fears often manifest as anger, backlash, need to control how change occurs and/or as guilt, shame, or the experiencing of target group authority figures as not experienced or competent enough. The next step is to acknowledge and work through those fears at all levels of the organization.[40]

Training in racism awareness and multiculturalism is crucial to removing fear and other barriers and to helping members of organizations embrace what they will gain as individuals and as an organization by fully embracing multiculturalism. Training should occur both within and across different levels of the organizational hierarchy and within and between different cultural groups.[41] It is crucial to a long-term successful intervention that all individuals come to see that some of the work in dismantling oppression entails working within one's own group; that is, whites need to learn to challenge and support other whites and people of color need space for continual self-definition and in-group problem solving and agenda setting. Successful group coalitions at this point in our history entail the ability to coalesce and to separate.

Review of organizational structures, processes, norms, and values by multicultural teams is a crucial next step. Individuals working within a structure to create change will need to develop allies. Involvement of team members as facilitators, trainers, and institutional change agents with high visibility helps employees see that the organization's commitment is real and is on-going. The team should set up methods of communicating their process and important outcomes. Problem spots within the organization need to be highlighted and changed. Areas that are acknowledging differences and working well should be celebrated.[42]

Unlearning racism in all its expressions is offered as a model for understanding how oppression works in any target/non-target relationship.[43] It is crucial that individuals realize how each person is sometimes in both positions. Multiculturalism, then, involves committing to the process of altering the variety of ways in which individuals and groups set up one-up/one-down dynamics. To paraphrase James Baldwin's comments in an open letter to Angela Davis, *"If they come for you tonight, they will be back for me in the morning."*

NOTES

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3. Target group is a term used to describe blacks (that is, Africans from across the Diaspora) and other people of color as well as other groups who have been historically and currently "targeted" within U. S. society as "less than" or different in an inferior way from the dominant population. The statistical odds for successful outcomes are less for members of a target group. Non-target groups, by contrast, are more likely to operate from a view that their "way" is better and to receive unearned privilege and increased life chances such as longer mortality, employment, access to credit, and higher incomes.

4. I assume in this paper, as has been my experience, that the dynamic of how racism manifests in U. S. black-white relationships is the paradigm for understanding the myth of superiority based on color. I see that the dynamic plays out among Africans across the Diaspora as well as among indigenous people world wide, people of color from Spanish speaking countries, and Asians from all parts of Asia and the Pacific rim. When I use the term "black" I encourage readers to think inclusively and to note how the example I am sharing or the theoretical point I am making fits or does not fit for their target group experience.

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